PROGRAM OVERVIEW

CreatiVets is a Certified 501 (c) 3  www.creativets.org
CreatiVets’ mission is to provide combat veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury with opportunities to use art, music, and creative writing to heal their unseen wounds of war.

Our goal is to empower veterans with tools they can use for the rest of their lives and enable them to see their own capacity for success in an arena outside the battlefield.
Every year, according to the Department of Defense, approximately one in five post-9/11 veterans are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

About 12% of Gulf War veterans and 15% of Vietnam veterans also struggle with post-traumatic stress in a given year, and between 50,000 to 400,000 veterans may suffer from the effects of a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

The social and economic costs of post-traumatic stress and TBI are immense, and the Department of Veteran Affairs reported in July 2016 that the veteran suicide rate in the United States averages 20 suicides per day.

Veterans now account for 18% of all suicides in America, despite making up less than 9% of the population.

The stated mission of CreatiVets is to identify United States combat veterans who struggle with post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury and provide opportunities for them to use art, music, and creative writing as part of their healing process.

Veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress are often unable to verbalize the impact of a traumatic experience, but for healing to occur, it’s critical that they externalize their stories so that their painful memories can be reconstructed and transformed in a positive way. Research has shown that art and music are particularly effective in addressing post-traumatic stress, in part because they engage the senses in expressing traumatic memories.

Many veterans have been unable to get the help they need, have been unsuccessful in their efforts to get help, or have not sought help due to the stigma associated with mental health issues. While CreatiVets does NOT claim to provide professional “treatment” or art and music “therapy,” CreatiVets DOES offer an alternative approach to individual self-expression through art and music education for combat veterans—the therapeutic benefits are a welcome bonus.

★ CreatiVets does not require an official or medical diagnosis of PTSD for veterans to be considered for participation.

“IT’S HARD TO EXPRESS IN WORDS HOW I FELT AFTER THE PROGRAM, BUT I KNOW I LET GO OF SOMETHING DEEP AND FEEL THAT THIS EXPERIENCE IS GOING TO ALLOW ME TO MAINTAIN THAT POSITIVE ATTITUDE WHILE GIVING ME THE COURAGE TO LIVE A MEANINGFUL LIFE WITH MY CHILDREN. “

- Veteran Participant, Art Program
Richard Casper Co-founded CreatiVets after experiencing firsthand the healing power of art and music. As an infantryman, Richard served in Iraq with the United States Marine Corps where he was hit 4 separate times by IEDs, suffered multiple concussions and was ultimately diagnosed with Traumatic Brain Injury.

He also lost a close friend while on patrol. After his diagnosis and being deemed unfit for duty, he returned home and found that his TBI and post-traumatic stress symptoms were debilitating. After a few attempts using psychiatric and psychotherapy approaches, he discovered the therapeutic benefits of art and music (and) realized that creative expression was the only thing that really helped.

Richard took ceramics and painting courses and was amazed at how quickly he began to experience a positive impact. Says Casper, “It was like I’d found this loophole--I found a way to talk about it, without talking about it.” The benefits continued when he learned to play guitar and write songs, opening another outlet for creative expression through which he could heal by telling his story.

“DISCOVERING CONCEPT-BASED ART AND THE POWER OF SONGWRITING SAVED MY LIFE,” RICHARD SAYS. “AFTER WHAT IT DID FOR ME, I KNEW IT COULD HELP OTHER VETERANS AS WELL, AND THAT’S WHAT I WANTED TO DO THROUGH CREATIVETS.”

Richard Casper, Co-Founder
We currently offer two programs: the Combat Veteran Songwriting Program in Nashville, TN and two Introduction to Art for Combat Veterans summer programs held at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Each program focuses on storytelling through the arts as a way to recover from traumatic experiences, to promote healing, and to provide tools the veterans can use in combatting stress, depression, and other effects of war.

“I STRONGLY BELIEVE EVERY VETERAN SHOULD TELL THEIR STORY FOR THE BENEFIT OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR LOVED ONES.... I DIDN’T WANT TO REVISIT THE SAD FEELINGS OR HORRIFIC MEMORIES. IT WASN’T UNTIL AFTER I BEGAN TO TELL MY STORY [THROUGH ART] THAT I FELT A SENSE OF RELIEF FROM SOME OF THE GRIEF I HELD INSIDE.”

— Veteran Participant, Introduction to Art for Combat Veterans
Research has shown that trauma survivors benefit from musical improvisation, telling stories, and songwriting with those who have been through similar experiences and “understand” them. Veterans who participate in the CreatiVets songwriting program have a unique opportunity to work with professional songwriters and musicians, alongside a fellow veteran, learning to use music to “hear” one another and connect.

The CreatiVets songwriting program is held in Nashville, Tennessee and begins when a veteran is met by a designated “Battle Buddy.” This “Battle Buddy,” a veteran who has already gone through the program, is there to help the new participant feel comfortable with the process from arrival, through the songwriting sessions, up until departure.

Veterans are paired with accomplished professional songwriters and musicians who lead a writing session to produce a song that creatively expresses the participant’s story. At the end of the 3-day program, the veteran will have finished a song that uniquely represents and expresses that participants story. Following the session, each veteran will receive a copy of his or her song to share with family and friends, as well as a guitar, a starter kit, and an introductory guitar lesson so the veteran can continue using music to heal.

Says Casper, “I always tell them, ‘If you’re going to learn only one song, learn YOUR song,’ because this gives the veteran a therapeutic way to tell keep telling their story and to think about it in a objective, non-traumatic way. CreatiVets also offers an online Veteran Learning Series so participants can learn new chords and techniques and continue developing their skills after completing the program.

The CreatiVets Songwriting programs covers all the costs of travel, transportation, meals, and lodging. Veterans who participate are not expected to pay for anything.

“AFER MY EXPERIENCE WITH CREATIVETS, I FELT AN INSTANT SENSE OF RELIEF.”

— Veteran Participant, Combat Veteran Songwriting Program
Artistic expression is particularly effective in relieving the symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress because it offers a sensory means of expressing traumatic memories, but does not require verbal expression, which so many veterans resist and avoid.

Introduction to Art for Combat Veterans is CreatiVets’ immersive three week art program that teaches combat veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress or traumatic brain injury to use concept-based art to tell their stories. The course introduces veterans to the college experience in an all-veteran environment that makes them feel comfortable and enables them to see their own capacity for success in an educational environment. Each class consists of up to 12 enrollees and is facilitated by combat veteran Richard Casper and other top art instructors. Using various mediums, including ceramics, painting, photography, woodworking, digital media, and creative writing, veterans learn new means of expression.

CreatiVets currently offers two art programs annually. These are both summer programs and are held at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Virginia Commonwealth University, both accredited universities.

Veterans who graduate receive college credit and alumni status at the university where they attended their program.

At the end of the program, each veterans’ artwork is featured in a gallery showing at SAIC and VCU, respectively, and is also featured in an exhibit at the National Veterans Art Museum. Says Casper, “The change we see in veterans who go through the program is really incredible. Once they discover art, it’s like they realize, ‘I may not have to words to describe what I went through, but I have this…I have this piece of art,’ and that piece of art represents something, that can help them start a conversation with their family or their friends.”

All CreatiVets art programs include the costs of travel, transportation, meals, and lodging. Veterans who participate are not expected to pay for anything.
A VETERAN’S STORY

“THIS PROGRAM SAVED MY LIFE.”

John joined the U.S. Marine Corps in 2003 and was stationed at Camp Pendleton. He served as a Combat Engineer and Rifleman and was deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan.

In May 2016, CreatiVets had a spot open up in our Introduction to Art for Combat Veterans course at SAIC, so we reached out to our veteran network for referrals. One of those resources was a U.S. Navy Corpsman who served with Richard Casper in Iraq. This Corpsman had also served with John and—sensing that he was having a hard time and suffering from depression—he reached out and suggested John apply to the program. John took his Corpsman’s advice and joined us just a few days later to begin the program.

He worked hard and immersed himself into the course. Richard could tell the experience was emotional and rewarding for John, but had no idea just how impactful the program had been until John approached him the night before graduation to share part of his story that he hadn’t previously disclosed. He told Richard that just a few weeks before the course, he had secretly begun selling his belongings as part of his plan to commit suicide. John was at the lowest point in his life, and was making arrangements to leave any benefits and money he could to his young son—it was then that he got the call from his Corpsman pushing him to reach out to CreatiVets.

“That was the second time [the Corpsman] has saved my life,” John said, because he knew the program had saved his life. He no longer wanted to kill himself—instead, he wanted to enroll in college, get a degree, and work on being a good example for his son.

John is now in his second semester at Long Beach City College, where he is pursuing a nursing degree because he wants to help other people. John said the CreatiVets program not only helped him express and address his emotions through art, but it also helped him see that he could be successful in a college environment.

“MY JOB WAS TO FIND IEDS AND TAKE THEM APART,” MARINE VETERAN JOHN EXPLAINED. “LITTLE DID I KNOW, I WAS PUTTING ALL THAT STUFF INSIDE OF ME.”
VETERAN REFERRALS
If you know of a veteran who might benefit from our programs, please let the veteran know about us (or let us know if you’d like us to reach out directly). We want to make sure every soldier gets the care he or she needs, and if we can’t help, we’ll work to find the resources that can.

FUNDING
We rely on the generosity of individual donors, grants, and corporate sponsors to fund our programs, and work diligently to be good fiscal stewards of your dollars. If you have a heart for veterans, the arts, or both, please consider making a donation, hosting a fundraiser, or sponsoring a program. The total cost to send a veteran through the Combat Veteran Songwriting Program is approximately $2,400. The total cost to send a veteran through the Introduction to Art for Combat Veterans program is approximately $5,500.

In addition to tuition, art supplies, instruments, and any other required materials, all CreatiVets programs include the costs of travel, transportation, meals, and lodging. Veterans who participate are not expected to pay for anything.

INVEST IN THE FUTURE OF CREATIVETS
When CreatiVets expanded the art program to a second campus, enrollment maxed out almost immediately. As of 2018, both summer programs will be led in part by CreatiVets alumni who are continuing their own healing process by helping other veterans find what they’ve already discovered—a path to healing, a place to start, and companions for the journey.

Along with this increased demand and the consistent interest of CreatiVets alumni, plans for additional programs at other colleges and universities are underway.

While we will continue conducting these successful summer programs, we will work to increase enrollment (while keeping class sizes appropriate). We are also in the process of initiating additional winter programs, introducing a film program (we are currently talking with UCLA, USC, Stanford, and Berkley about launching the program), planning to undertake an ambitious art/travel program for Vietnam veterans.

The flexibility and growth opportunities of our peer-to-peer approach offer limitless possibilities. Ideally, veterans who complete a CreatiVets art or songwriting program will take what they’ve learned back to their own communities and spread the word. Our community programs are designed to offer veterans who are seeking relief for their symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress a taste of what a full CreatiVets program has to offer.

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INFORMATIONAL AWARENESS
Social media, email, and even word-of-mouth are powerful ways to share information with family, friends, co-workers, acquaintances, or whoever! If you love what we do, please tell others, follow and share our posts on social media, and connect us with resources that can help promote our mission and efforts.

VISUAL + AUDIO AWARENESS
There many ways to share the news and lots of opportunities to make struggling veterans and/or their loved-ones aware that there are programs that could help.

Sometimes the most valuable and most compelling evidence of what is possible for veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury is the evidence itself. When a veteran hears a song or sees artwork that they can relate to, paths toward healing become easier to see.

ART SHOWINGS
Hosting and art show or a gallery exhibit for a veteran artist is a great way for our supporters to get the word out about CreatiVets. Businesses that want to support our veterans could use their lobby to display veterans artwork.

WRITER’S ROUNDS
In Nashville, we have these things called “Writer’s Rounds.” These are events where several songwriters get in front of a crowd of music/songwriting fans and play songs they’ve written in turns, or rounds. Writer’s Rounds are great fundraisers, plus they inspire an audience to share the music they’ve heard with their friends and family, spreading the word even further.

“EVEN THOUGH MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY DON’T UNDERSTAND WHAT IT WAS LIKE IN IRAQ, I BELIEVE MY SONG GIVES THEM A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT I WENT THROUGH WHILE DEPLOYED.”

— Veteran Participant, Combat Veteran Songwriting Program

LEARN MORE AT:
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Facebook: facebook.com/creativeterans
Instagram: @creativets
Twitter: @creativets1
Or e-mail at info@creativets.org